

Tuesday, May 24, 2011

Testimony by John Duffy, President of MEA/NEA Local 1 and the 6-E Coordinating Council regarding Senate Bill 7, Senate Joint Resolution C, and House Bill 4572. MEA Local 1 and the 6-E Coordinating Council represents over 5,000 educators and education support personnel from the following fourteen school districts in Macomb County: Anchor Bay, Armada, Center Line, Chippewa Valley, Clintondale, Fraser, Lakeview, L'Anse Creuse, Mount Clemens, New Haven, Richmond, Romeo, South Lake, and Warren Woods; and two school districts in Wayne County: Harper Woods and Grosse Pointe.

Speaking on behalf of my members, we are fundamentally opposed to Senate Bill 7, Senate Joint Resolution C, and House Bill 4572 because they take away local control from each district, they have a dramatically negative effect on working conditions, and they will do fundamental harm to our economy. Each of these bills also unfairly singles out public educators in Michigan by targeting them for the easiest and earliest implementation of the most egregious aspects of each bill. Most important of all, these bills do nothing to improve the education of Michigan's children in any way.

For over 40 years, Local 1 and the 6-E Coordinating Council have bargained with all of our school boards. All of our contracts are different because each relates to the unique needs and resources of each district. One thing all of our districts have in common, though, is that they have all given concessions to help with the financial realities we all face. However, SB7, SJR C, and HB 4572 negate local control. In effect, the state legislature is now the bargaining agent for all districts. These bills use the arbitrary and capricious starting point of forcing educators to pay at least 20% of their health care costs, coupled with a possible hard cap of paying anything above \$13,000 for a family health care plan. Why 20% and \$13,000? Why not 19% and \$12,275? These numbers are a one size doesn't fit all that negates the whole concept of local control and allows for no real flexibility for school districts to bargain with their staff.

Regarding educators' working conditions, health care benefits have been negotiated in lieu of pay raises for decades because good health care is absolutely essential to the job of an educator. School working environments are completely different than most working environments in the private sector. Educators and education support personnel work in close proximity with hundreds or thousands of students, many of whom come to school sick. Some students also don't adhere to the same standards of hygiene that is demanded in the private sector. We rely on good health plans to get us back to school quickly and effectively for our students and that's why we bargained for good health care coverage in lieu of pay raises or bonuses like those found in the private sector.

The argument now is that the private sector has to pay for health care so educators have to pay, as well. However, during the roaring 1990's when line workers were being handed \$10,000 bonus checks and executives were receiving record-breaking salaries and bonuses, schools were not part of that largesse. I was on a bargaining team in Mount Clemens where we went two years in the late nineties without a contract before settling on a three year contract consisting of three zero percent pay raises. No raise and no bonus for educators. The school board's lawyer told us, "Teaching is not a business.

You can't expect to be compensated like one." Truer words were never spoken. Schools are not businesses in the best of times and certainly not in the worst of times. Schools are for educating children to improve our civilization; not to become businesses that create an educated "product" in the most cost effective manner possible.

Economically, these bills will instantly wipe out thousands of dollars of educators' pay, effectively cutting over 10% of a new teacher or support personnel's salary. This money has been taken out of the "consumer economy" that drives Michigan and has been effectively given to businesses through a \$1.8 billion tax break with no strings attached. Tax breaks are great for those who get them. But consumer spending drives our economy. How does instantly taking hundreds of millions of dollars collectively away from educators allow them to go out and purchase more Michigan and American made products? In fact, right now the Richmond School Board has also cut each Richmond educator's pay by 10%, which will be having a negative effect on the Richmond business community. Also, the health care industry that many believe must remain a for-profit industry will see its profits drop precipitously when its services are under-utilized due to higher premiums.

Finally, what is the incentive for being in education when pay, benefits, and working conditions dramatically decrease? These bills target educators in many ways. SB 7 affects all educators but has an "opt out" under section 15 for municipal employees only. SRJ C is an "opt out" for college employees and other public employees because it only takes effect if the people of Michigan vote for it. Finally, HB 4572 effectively guts health care to the point where it's not worth negotiating over. Our kids are learning quickly that education is one of the last careers they want to enter now that pay, benefits, and working conditions have eroded to the point that entering the world of private business would be far more rewarding on all levels.

To conclude, these bills should be defeated or removed from consideration because they do nothing to improve education for our children in Michigan. They do not create good-paying jobs that are desperately needed in Michigan today. They do nothing to attract the best and the brightest to begin or continue a career in education. By properly funding education with a budget that was in surplus at the beginning of the year, we can continue to educate our young people to become productive citizens who have good-paying jobs with benefits and a retirement plan commensurate with their level of education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Duffy", with a stylized flourish at the end.

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& Chairperson, 6-E Coordinating Council
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